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Charging the Hero

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Arc 3: Deposition

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Meeting

The day after the first hearing ended. I left my office first thing in the morning.

My destination was the detention center. I had to meet with Claudia.

The December morning was cold, and on my first step outside, even though I wore a heavy coat, a piercing cold wind reached my skin.

As a court-appointed lawyer, the country would cover some expenses. But I would only receive my actual pay in a month's time.

For now, I wanted to economize, so I walked to the center from my office equivalent to a vacant room.

A few hours into my walk, I eventually found the boorish, unapproachable concrete building just as I had left it.

Looking up at the detention center building letting off its usual imposing atmosphere, I noticed today's sky was a nicely-clear shade of blue.

There was nothing to interrupt the sun. The concrete wall was hit by direct sunlight. But even so, the dark atmosphere lurking in its confines didn't disappear, and just by taking a step into the center, I felt as if the temperature had dropped a few degrees.

I finished the same paperwork as before, fulfilling my promise of coming to see Claudia.

I was led to the visiting room. It wasn't as if I didn't know the way. However, to prevent crime and keep watch, the guards accompanied me there.

The visiting room held a savage air absent of anything. Nothing but a transparent glass wall in the center, a table and some chairs.

Besides the light dangling from the ceiling, there was nothing to illuminate the room.

I lowered myself onto the chair, looking at the door on the other side of the glass.

This side and that one held a different air.

The people on this side lived in the world of humans who followed rules.

Having rules definitely did make it harder to breathe every day. But as long as you followed the rules, you could receive protection from society.

However, society would never vouch for the people on the other side of the glass. For that had broken the rules.

Saving them who had completely been discarded by society was my job.

I think it's a business of karma. When this was a place supposed to be kept isolated from society as could be, a place to accommodate dangerous humans. Yet I was trying to save those hated existences.

... I heard the sound of a turning doorknob.

It wasn't on this side. A resident of the other side... Claudia Rheinland entered the visiting room.

When she took her first step into the room, Claudia looked especially frightened. Entering while urged on by guards, she was holding the same sword as yesterday in her hands, her black hair extending to her hips as her blue eyes nervously moved around, keeping wary of the area.

"Take a seat over there."

The guard just urged her on. But even so, her body twisted for a moment as if something had stabbed at her from behind. "Eek!" She let out a small scream.

"S-sorry."

After saying that in her obscure, hard-to-catch voice, she took a seat in front of me. There was only a distance of ten centimeters between us.

But because of this thin glass, it felt as if we were ten thousand kilometers apart.

Self Introduction

Even with glass between us, with a cute girl in front of me, I was slightly nervous.

If she were a normal girl, I don't think I'd even be nervous at all. But Claudia Rheinland wasn't any ordinary girl.

First off, a normal girl doesn't get arrested on murder allegations. Second, a normal girl doesn't carry around a weapon as if it were all she had to remember her parents by.

And third, a normal girl doesn't proclaim herself the hero.

... Maybe princess would've worked out, I thought as I looked at those blue eyes before me.

But I'd have to revise that... A princess didn't look so unfortunate.

The girl called Claudia Rheinland was a girl whose full appraisal gave off some lingering shadows.

Unrelated to how dim the room was, irrelevant to the healthy radiance of sunlight, it looked as if the pale light of the moon would suite her better; a girl suited to a dark, damp air. That was Claudia Rheinland's image.

... Rather than a princess, perhaps she was closer to a witch.

"Um..."

Perhaps discomforted by my long look, or perhaps that's what her usual expression was like, Claudia narrowed her slanted eyes and looked at me.

"Is there... anything strange about me?"

"Eh? Oh, not at all. I was thinking over what we should talk about."

"... I... don't know anything about you."

... But she added on. "You're the same, aren't you?"

"Yes. You're exactly right. Unfortunately, we don't know anything about one another. In this instance, the first thing we should do is introduce ourselves."

I said it as cheerfully as I could. I didn't want to put her on guard, and more than anything, to fight in the trial to come, her cooperation was an absolute necessity.

... You have to build a relation of trust with the client.

That weird, spaced out, but proficient attorney boss of mine always spilled that phrase from her mouth.

So I decided to do just that.

"I'm Daniel Lockhart the lawyer. My job is to protect your rights."

"Rights? Exactly what part of me would that be protecting?"

She made a face that implied she really didn't understand from the depths of her heart. I could see at once that she had increased her grip on her sword.

"Those rights would be your basic human rights."

I thought to recite the definition from the textbook word for word, but stopped myself.

"Pretty much, I get money to protect your legal interests. That's my job."

"... Money? But I don't remember paying you any money."

... And I don't think you have money in the first place.

The first part of her words were well enunciated, while the later parts dropped in tone before fading out entirely.

"Even if you don't pay, the country is paying me. This country has a law that, no matter the criminal, they shall always be afforded an attorney."

... Then, said Claudia. "The reason you're protecting me is because of money?"

The tone of her voice was the strongest so far.

"That's right. I took on this job because I wanted the money."

I gave an immediate reply. Claudia's mouth closed into a straight line, as she gave me a sharp glare.

To be honest, I could have lied there. That I'm saving her because I treasure

her, or because I want to protect her, and such idealistic drivel was better suited to a young girl in her teens.

But I wasn't good at lying. Even if I spouted driven from my mouth, I'm sure before those piercing blue eyes that seemed to see through everything, it will all have been for naught.

... If I lied to her, I couldn't get her trust. In that case, I don't care if she hates me, I just want us to be honest.

"It's not like I... was living a life of camping out over there."

Claudia's used an overly self-depreciating tone. And I recalled. The words I had said in court.

"I had a proper house there, and a bed, and a table, and chair, and even a bookshelf. I was always reading the books father left behind, learning about the world through them."

At the first part her stone was strong, but after that, it gradually began to shake, and become a tearful plea.

"I... am not a savage. Neither am I an oddball. I am not defective in the head. I only thought to do something good for everyone's sake."

I didn't know what to say. I silently listened to her words.

"I... know about people... like you. They come out a lot in the books at my house. They're the type of villains who'll easily cheat, trick, use violence, and do the worst sorts of things for their own selfish desires, right?"

A majority of that was close to false allegations. But I didn't think to deny it.

... I mean, she wasn't wrong. I was definitely using her to earn my bread.

As I recall, the amount you can earn in court-appointed defense is close to chicken feed. The level when you'll finally get some loose change if you win the suit. But whether it be easy money, or small change, there's no changing the fact it was money earned by using people.

"The worst sort of person. More wicked than the demon lord. The criminal calmly bullying the weak isn't me, it's you!"

“Is that so... by the way, in your books, what happens to those villains?”

On my question, her most abject face of all turned to a smile. But even if I said that, it was the sort gained from tormenting another, a cruel smile.

“The ally of justice kills them all. Without leaving a single villain alive..... The ally of justice uncovers their evil deeds... all of them... all of them, everyone is properly defeated... justice always wins, and evil always loses... and the final page is always a happy end.”

Claudia continued talking, containing her sobs. She was looking down, so I couldn't see her expression, but I thought she was surely crying.

Large drops of water dripped onto the table. Her entire body was trembling as she spoke.

“So why... are you all I have? Why is a villain like you the only one who'll save me?”

Claudia raised her face. What's she'd been desperately enduring to that point had crumbled, and with all her emotions on display, rather than some hero, she looked like a simple, normal girl.

The girl was crying after all. Nothing more and nothing less, raising a stifled cry I couldn't call a voice, she looked as if she was wishing for help from the entire world.

Negotiations (1)

The darkness she carried was deep... I thought. But I couldn't find the words to call out.

I got the feeling what I should be doing was quietly listening to her words.

"I... hate it."

Claudia's voice was shaking. She bit her lip, and while her long bangs were covering them, I'm sure the blue eyes behind were glaring at me.

"People like you, I loathe them... aren't you... the same?"

She asked with a voice so small it was vanishing.

Should I answer yes, or answer no, I didn't know the correct answer.

... Defective in the head, huh.

I tried reflecting over Claudia's words.

... I never said anything like that. I didn't, but...

"I pretty much did," I muttered.

Since I whispered in a small voice, I thought she wouldn't be able to hear, but it seems she did.

Without saying anything, Claudia simply stared at me.

"I'm sorry. I said something awful."

"Why are you apologizing?"

Her voice quivered so much, it was impossible to make out her actual pronunciation... but I knew what she was trying to say.

"I'm sorry. Without knowing a thing, I convinced myself I understood, and spoke ill of you. I was only thinking to get you an innocent verdict, and that made me make such a selfish assumption on my part... I made that wholly idiotic plea."

... So I'm sorry. I apologized.

Sniffle... I heard the light slurping sound of her nose. She stroked her bangs aside, letting me see her expression well, but she was making an unsightly expression different from the one before.

Before I had realized it, her eyes were bloodshot, and her face itself had turned from its pale skin to a shade of pink.

Even her nose was runny, her mouth was open slovenly, and she was neurotically tampering with her hair, collapsing her hair style.

But this was the true her.

Pushing out her lips, she spoke. "Is there no one else?"

"Meaning?"

"Mr. Lawyer. Is there really... no one but you?"

"There's no one. No one wanted to take on your defense. So the court appointed a lawyer. At the start, I wanted to decline it myself."

... When I told her no one wanted to take her defense, her unsightly expression collapsed even more.

"So no one... likes me at all."

She sounded awfully far-sighted, her tone as if she had given up.

"So... no one actually wants a hero of justice."

Her words continued on.

"I'm just a criminal after all."

After some self-deprecating words came out, it all came out like a flood.

To be honest, it was getting on my nerves.

... Stop it already, you fool.

"That's right, it's just as you said. No one thinks anything of you."

I incidentally let my true feelings out. But that's fine. If this girl continued talking anymore... I'm sure she would break. So right now, I needed to stop her mouth from moving no matter what.

"Look here, justice is something human kind has been experimenting with for

centuries, and it's a question so difficult that we still haven't found the answer. It's not the sort of truth a teenager like you, what's more, a kid without much knowledge is suddenly going to arrive at. So stop thinking about such things for now. Put it to the side."

"... Eh?"

"Justice and peace are humanity's universal theme. It's true it's a vital and important problem, but it's impossible to resolve it here and now. So you can live a smart life, let me give you some adult advice. You rarely get a chance to hit a home run in life. The basic rule is to try for a hit. It's important to start by building up from the small things."

I get the feeling I had abruptly blurted out something that was clearly out of place. But I guess that's fine. Anyways, I need to take leadership, and take her somewhere else, from this gloomy, damp place to a bright, healthy space.

As she hesitated, I spoke to her.

"That's how it is, so stop with those tedious things, and let's get to the fun business talks.

"Bizznes"

She tilted her head. It seems her tears had already stopped. Her stiff expression was just a little frayed and crumbling.

But her current face was much more lovable than the precious one, and I got the feeling I could come to like it.

"That's right. As I said before, I'm getting money to take on your defense. Now that I've taken on the request, I won't betray you. Even if you hate and betray me, there's absolutely no way I'll ever betray you."

... So use me as you will, I said.

"Humans who act for their selfish desires are villains? Then so be it. There's only one person in the world who can tread down your life. Only you. Yet at this moment, your life is about to be trampled down by some incomprehensible thing called society. That is unfair. It isn't something that should be done to a person."

... So fight against it, for your own sake.

It was mostly winging it. But I got the feeling it was closer to life than some poorly played acting.

I want to be trusted by the client... by her. So I won't lie, and I won't betray.

Even if it's something painful on the ears, I'll speak my mind with honesty.

If that doesn't work, that's fine. But as long as just a little bit of my sincerity got through... I could go on.

Claudia silently looked at me. But by the time I noticed it, the shadow covering her had vanished, her expression being one as if she had been freed from a demon's possession.

Negotiations (2)

Once I has said everything I wanted to, a strange silence continued for a while.

... Did my words get through to her?

I was a little anxious.

The only thing between us was a single thin sheet of glass. Besides the small round excuses for holes made to let our voices get through, it didn't have any other characteristics, and it was a glass so thin it looked as if it would break if I hit it.

But at present, this glass towered before me as a firm wall stronger than anything

From how her face looked down, it seemed like Claudia was thinking over what I had told her.

She simply stared fixatedly at the empty space on the table.

But eventually, she let out a light sigh, lifted her head, and looked straight at me.

Her wariness... was gone.

"I don't have any choices, do I?"

"Yeah, you don't."

I answered bluntly. But that was the obvious response.

"Besides you, there isn't anyone who will defend me, right?"

"There isn't. Or could it be you have some relatives, or anyone you could rely on in this country?"

Claudia shook her head. "Until I was ten and three months, I lived with my father in the forest."

I questioned how she remembered so well, but remembered at once.

... She had savant syndrome.

“I don’t know any humans besides my father.”

“I... see.”

I asked what I had wanted to for a while now. “Was your father the hero?”

Claudia shook her head. “The hero was my grandfather, apparently.”

“Apparently? You’ve never met him?”

“Never. By the time I gained awareness of my surroundings, I was living with father in the forest. So I don’t know my mother either.”

“I see. Did your father teach you how to read and write?”

“Only a little. It was mostly self-study.”

Somehow, unlike before, the current Claudia was talkative. If she didn’t say it here, she would never be able to say it again, she gave off that sort of cornered feel.

“So you were always alone.”

I said what was on my mind. Her field of vision dropped.

“Yes. I was alone.” She said softly.

“You did a good job living alone. There are loads of monsters in the Dark Forest, right?”

Monster. Fiend. Mythic. Spectre. There were many lifeforms living in this world. Even among all of them, monsters were treated as a separate case.

More ferocious and brutal than a wild animal, a single monster boasted the destructive power to wipe whole villages off the map.

They didn’t look like something the girl before my eyes could take on. But Claudia made a perplexed face.

“Are you scared of them? Monsters?”

For some reason, it felt as if she asked a terribly embarrassing question, but, “Yeah, monsters are scary. I’d never want to approach one,” I replied.

“I see... then I’m sure they were afraid of me, then. When I was inside the

forest, I rarely ever encountered monsters.”

“Really? They never thought you looked like a tasty treat?”

... Pff, Claudia gave a smile, and said, “What’s with that?”

“Occasionally injured monsters, or mythics plagued with illness, I’ve seen a few of them before.”

... But they’d either die before long, or run away before I could save them.

“So I think they were afraid.”

“Hmmm. I see. Then what are you afraid of?”

“Me? I’m...”

... scared of there being no one, of me being alone, said Claudia, as she embraced the sword in both hands.

“No matter what words I let out, no one listens. Even if I read a book, the book never answers me. When I swing my sword, it only slices the air in vain. Even while I wrote my journals, it only looked as if I was lining up letters. As things kept on, it began to feel as if I was the only one in the world; it was really lonely... I felt like dying.”

... That’s why I’m scared of being alone, Claudia told me.

“Is that why you don’t want to let go of that?”

I pointed at the sword she clutched in both hands. There, she held it away from me as if to hide it.

“This is a memento of my father. This alone tells me that I exist here without a doubt. It’s my treasure. So precious, when it’s with me, I can calm down.”

... You missed the mark, Cate.

It’s not that she wanted a weapon. Claudia simply wanted the warmth of another human being, I thought in my heart where no one would hear.

And I thought. I’m sure something like that was a trivial matter. To all humans in the world apart from her.

Negotiations (3)

“Hey, Mr Lawyer.”

For some reason, Claudia was calling me a mister.

“What’s bizznes?”

“Business is business. It means my evil schemes.”

Claudia puckered her lips, and made a doubtful face. Perhaps my jokes had gone a bit too far.

“That was a figure of speech. It’s not like I’m actually going to do anything evil. I’ll be doing things that are to both of our benefits.”

“... But I can’t do anything. I don’t know anything. My head isn’t as good as yours, and like that person...”

Claudia averted her eyes, and shut her mouth.

... That person?

“I’m not as eloquent as her.”

... Ah, you mean Cate. Come to think of it, she beat us black and blue in court.

“I won’t be... any use.”

When she had finally regained her spirit, Claudia made a depressing face once more.

“It’s not like you have to force yourself.”

If possible, I’d like her to, but perhaps it’s best I don’t ask too much of her. I continued on.

“If you have to margin to take extenuating circumstance into consideration, I’ll use it as a weapon to defend, and if there’s a problem with the prosecution, taking a stab at it is my job.”

“Does that person... make any mistakes?”

“She doesn’t. It’s the system making the mistakes. That female prosecutor is

an irritating one with a twisted spirit, but she does her prosecutor job properly. She'll submit the most trivial piece of evidence if she finds it, and even if there's an evidence or testimony that will be a huge minus to the prosecution's case, she'll take it up front. She doesn't run or hide, and she doesn't intentionally conceal anything. Even if there's a disadvantageous evidence or testimony, that female prosecutor won't hide it, and if the other side objects, she'll properly listen to them."

... There aren't many people that can do that. Yet why are they all such unpleasant folks, I wonder. Or so I complained, in lament.

"But I... don't think I like that person."

As she behaved nervously, I whispered a secret to her.

"neither do I."

Hiding, and speaking ill of people behind their backs was somewhat embarrassing.

It felt as if I had returned to my childhood, but seeing Claudia awkwardly raise an embarrassed laugh, I felt it might not be bad to go back to being a kid.

"I have to thank her for that," I went on.

"It's because Cate submitted all evidence at the scene, that we were able to find this thread to a turnabout."

"Turnabout, is it?"

I put a pause on my words, taking a careful look at her.

The sharp look in her eyes, maybe because she had calmed down, had become a calm look.

The wrinkle on her forehead was gone, and an overall mild impression had begun emanating from her.

As she used her blue eyes to look at me in wonder, I finally got to the main matter at hand.

"There's no mistaking that night, right?"

I pushed through with force. Her spine stiffened, as she lent an ear to my words.

“There’s no mistaking that you headed for the scene, the hotel, on November 10th, right?”

“There’s no mistake.”

She said it clearly. Her tone without the slightest hesitation made me finally come to the conclusion I trust her.

Negotiations (4)

... Claudia didn't go to the hotel on the 11th. But the security camera feeds were presented as her riding to the viewing platform on the 11th.

What was this discrepancy? Could it be cleaned up as human error, or could it be... the result brought about by someone's crime?

I asked Claudia. "About that night... could you tell me in detail what happened on the 10th?"

The softened air to now cleared up like mist, and I felt as if the surrounding temperature had suddenly dropped.

Sensing that sort of air, Claudia furrowed her brow, and made a serious face.

"... That night, I went to kill the demon lord."

"That's the part I don't understand."

Claudia tilted her head. I continued on.

"You were living your life in that forest. You'd never been to Grimbeld before, right?"

She gave a small nod.

"How did you know how to get there?"

"Um, there was a map of the world's countries in my house."

She answered with a nervous air. "I'd always had a liking for that map, and whenever I was bored, I would often look at it."

"Even if you looked at it a lot, it was a map of the globe, right? You could remember that?"

On my question, she easily nodded.

... How fearsome, savant syndrome.

"But wait a tick. Even if you know the place, that doesn't mean you'd be able to get here instantly. Do you know just how much distance there is between the

Dark Forest and here?”

The countries bordering the Dark Forest no-man’s land would be the Commonwealth of Sodom, the Republic of Arlegio, and the Military State of Jahziehl.

Each and every one of those countries was considerably far from Grimbeld. If you used a chartered airplane, perhaps around fifteen hours?

“... I ran.”

She said quietly, as I thought this child wasn’t a normal girl.

“I see, so you ran here. Nice job.”

“Um, well, thank you.”

For some reason, Claudia’s face was red. Was she embarrassed?

Ahem, I lightly cleared my throat to return this strange air to normal.

“What about food? You don’t have any money, do you?”

“I brought loads of dried fruits and vegetables with me. And I’m fine if I don’t eat for a week, so...”

Come to think of it, this girl, in the shot taken right at the time of her arrest, she was more withered away, but now she looked just a little plump.

“Were the detention center’s meals tasty?”

“Yes. It’s been nothing but bad things since I came here, but the food was really good.”

“I see. Then that’s... good.

Anyways, it seems her treatment in investigations and the center wasn’t bad.

... How unfortunate. If they conducted any forceful investigations, I could have used it to attack the prosecution.

But so be it. If Claudia’s happy, then that’s fine.

More importantly, there’s something I had to probe further into. “Could you tell my about the letter?”

“It’s the letter that became the trigger for you coming here in the first place.

Do you remember anything?"

"Umm, the letter had been delivered before I had realized it."

Claudia folded her arms, looking up and to the right. Perhaps this was her pose of trying to remember something.

She continued. "When I woke up that morning, there was a letter stuck under the door."

"The door? Of your house?"

"Yes. Nothing like that had ever happened before, so I was really surprised. I didn't know what to do, so I kept staring at it all the way to noon."

... Did she not know what a letter was? No, maybe that was natural.

"Was there a sender's name?"

Claudia shook her head as if it were natural. If she knew that, we wouldn't be going through so much trouble.

"It only said the demon lord would be coming to the roof of the Westminster Hotel in Grimfeld on November the 10th at the twenty first hour. And to burn and dispose of the letter once I had finished reading."

... how cautious, I thought. And Claudia's savant syndrome was really helping me out.

Normally, you wouldn't remember the content of a letter delivered a month ago. But by the look on her face, it seemed as if she knew it word for word.

"So I... couldn't stand still anymore..."

Claudia's words started to become evasive.

"What was the demon lord to you?"

"Something I had to kill no matter what."

I was contrarily surprised but her response that came much too quickly. She had become talkative, but when it came to the demon lord, her tone changed to a frigid one.

"The demon lord is an evil existence to the world. A detestable existence, and

one that can definitely not be allowed to live in it. If you don't properly kill them, have them draw final breath, they will bring calamity to humanity. The incarnation of evil who threatens the peace of all people in the world."

... I wonder what it is.

My head felt fuzzy. "Did you learn that from your father?"

"Yes, that too. But it was also written in the books. There are plenty of terrible things the demon lord had done up to now. Mountains of people were slaughtered without meaning, tortured through cruel means... just reading it made me sick to my stomach."

I had also read books like that before. But never have I actually believed them.

There were clear traces of editing, and there were photos that clearly snapped a record of a different era entirely, and more than anything, it was over fifty years ago.

... There was no way I could confirm their authenticity. So I didn't trust them.

But had she come to trust it? Something so warped by the occult?

Seeing as the mere thought of the demon lord had revived her previous wariness and that sharp look in her eyes, I was sure that was the case.

Negotiations (5)

“Let me tell you this country’s history, or rather its background.”

I wrung out my insufficient knowledge to tell Claudia about Grimbeld.

“The country is the only country in the world that didn’t participate in the war with the demon lord fifty years ago. Why do you think that is?”

“Pacifism?”

“No. If you trace history from the country’s founding, it’s a heinous land full of blood and violence, this place. The turning point in Grimbeld becoming the neutral power it is today was a lady called Gloria taking the throne.”

“She did something?”

“Yes, she did. Or rather something was done to her. The people, you see. They locked Gloria in prison, and shoved all the responsibility of the war going on at the time onto the queen. She was executed. Her head lopped off; died instantly. She was eighteen, just like you.”

... After that, this country was visited by terrible calamity, I went on.

“Killing the queen and overthrowing the crown didn’t resolve a thing. The country at the time was terribly poor. In both the physical and mental sense. They couldn’t help but want to make it someone’s fault. Gloria was made into one of those so-called scapegoats.”

“Did she really have any responsibility for the war?”

“Who knows? They didn’t give her a trial or anything. Even if you call her a queen, she was a young lass oblivious to how the world turned, it seems, so I doubt she was actually responsible for anything. But there’s no way the people of the time could know that. Back then, there didn’t have the scientific breakthroughs we have today. With our current DNA analysis, we can tell if the person before our eyes is a homo sapien. But to the people of the time, the crown was akin to a mysterious monster.”

... They didn’t think to treat her as a human, I brought it to a close.

“And thus ends the history lesson. While facing an era of chaos, the people who overthrew their crown banded together, and in order to never let such a tragedy come to pass again, they set up laws of absolute adherence. They made it so whoever it was, they would be granted the opportunity of defense, and they stopped trying to shove everything onto a single person. For argument’s sake, there’s still royalty in this country, but while the king reigns, he does not rule. He has nothing you can call authority. He’s just a symbol.”

... This country will never ally with anyone, I continued.

“When the demon lord commanded his fearsome army, and declared war on the whole world, when he started his invasion, and even when a single country fell, we never joined the alliance, and we didn’t accept the demon lord either. There are some who speak ill of this attitude as cowardice, but... well, that’s true, but even so, this country respects the opinion of every individual. It won’t automatically label someone it doesn’t know about as evil or good. Those are the sort of rule that we live under.”

“And that’s why I was granted a defense attorney?”

“... That’s right.”

“But the people of the country surely think I’m mistaken, right?”

“Well, there are people who think that way, I’m sure. No matter how just they know the law is, there are some things they can’t convince their emotions.”

“Mr. Lawyer, at first you thought to refuse my defense, didn’t you?”

Claudia closed her eyes, and asked. “Do you hate me after all?”

“The reason I thought to decline was because I’m a civil lawyer, and I had an aversion to criminal cases. But in the end, I decided based on whether I would be getting paid or not. So it’s not like I hate you as a person or anything.”

... Money is nice, I continued on.

“When humans get emotional, they soon lose their rationality, and make mistaken judgement. When they really don’t know if the one before them is villain or virtue, they rashly believe in misleading information, and give an incorrect verdict. But money is always equal, you know. If I didn’t decide with

money, and refused this request based on personal opinion, what would have become of you? You'd have long since gotten a guilty verdict. Because I calculated interest to make a rational decision, we've reached our current point."

"Then do you think the demon lord may not have been a bad guy, Mr. Lawyer?"

"No idea," I said at once. "Dead men tell no tales. No one in the world knows, something like that."

"I... did something wrong?" Claudia made a grievous expression. "My father was wrong?"

"Claudia, right now, you're relying on emotion.

I pointed out and kept on.

"I don't know your father. So I don't know what sort of thoughts he used to decide the demon lord was evil, and I don't know if he was right. So I'll have to put my decision for that one on hold. I, you see, I don't want to decide things on emotion. So you have to be the one to decide."

"Me?"

"That's right. What do you want to do? After living eighteen years of live, what sort of future do you want to live?"

She went silent for a while. Staring fixatedly at a point above the table.

... I'm somewhat feeling unlawyerly right now. Am I supposed to be this child's teacher.

"I don't know. Back then, I acted thinking the demon lord was an evil that had to be killed. But right now, I don't know. So I'll stop thinking about the demon lord for a while, and use the same methods as you. I'll try acting for my own interests."

"I see, then that's negotiations complete. I for my interests, and you for yours, we'll cooperate with one another."

... Let's win in court, I said as I held out my hand to shake hers. And I noticed that the glass was in the way, making it impossible.

But it seems handshakes weren't necessary. She trusted me. I could tell from her expression that had begun to brighten up.

The Events of the 10th (1)

Thinking it was already fine, I asked.

“Please tell me what happened on the 10th. What did you see, and what did you do on the hotel rooftop? Even the most trivial of details are fine, so if there’s anything you noticed, please tell me.”

Claudia thought for a moment. No, she was trying to remember. Looking at the light dangling from the ceiling a while, she muttered lightly. “I was surprised.”

“Okay? Surprised about what?”

“I actually doubted it. Whether this holy sword would really be able to cut that demon lord.”

She held out her sword. She placed it on the table, but her hand gripping the hilt showed no signs of parting.

For a moment, her legs moved neurotically. Her tic had begun to come out, but even so, without putting the sword away, she spread it on the table so I could see it well.

“This sword can only cut the demon lord. That is what father taught me, and I did actually go out in the forest to test it a number of times, but I couldn’t cut anything.”

“Ah, but there was one other thing it could cut,” Claudia added.

“Really? By the police documents, it wasn’t able to cut any lifeforms, but is that not the case?”

... It was a new fact. I hoped it would provide a hint towards this case’s resolution.

“In the past, this sword cut father.”

“... Eh?”

Could it be the reason her father died was...

Contrary to my bad premonition, “When father was teaching me how to use a sword, he nicked his finger. The wound wasn’t deep, but I do wonder why it cut.”

She spoke of the time with a face yearning for times past.

A sword that could only cut the demon lord. But it had managed to cut Claudia’s father.

... I wonder what that meant.

“If I’m not mistaken, the holy sword Blutgang responds to blood, according to the police reports?”

“Right, I learned that from father. In the past, the person who made this sword mixed the demon lord’s blood into the metal. So this sword is supposed to react to demon lord blood, but... perhaps there is a different reason altogether. Why this sword can only cut demon lords, and passes through those who are not, I don’t really know.”

Claudia took the sword back, and held it close.

“I thought I understood it. But it’s really all unknowns, I see.”

I put up a theory.

Even if there was a sword that could only cut demon lords out there, would it actually be of any use?

It’s true, if it didn’t cut anything besides demon lords, it would stand the test of time well. Because nothing else in existence could touch its blade, It wouldn’t corrode, and there wasn’t the worry of the edge of the blade chipping.

But so what? You can just wipe crime off a sword, and if it’s corroded, it should be discarded. If the blade is chipped, go buy a new sword already.

... If swords are no good, then guns would work too, why is she using such an anachronistic weapon?

“The demon lord possessed an exceedingly sturdy body, apparently.”

As if to answer my question, Claudia embraced the sword as she spoke.

“A normal sword wouldn’t be able to scratch his skin, and all sorts of magic

weapons fall flat against him.”

“That’s not even human anymore.”

“Even among the magi, the demon lord was an especially special existence, it seems. So this holy sword was necessary. If you don’t have it, you’ll never be able to harm him.”

For the demon lord who could be cut by none, this was the only sword that could wound him.

“The demon lord’s defense was considerable. If that’s how it was, I can see how troubled the people of the time would be.”

“For argument’s sake, there were people capable of injuring him. For example, it was possible for the demon lord himself.”

“You mean suicide? It’s true, if weapons don’t work, having him self-destruct sounds like an enticing option.”

I tried looking through my memory of the war fifty years ago. Until the holy sword made its appearance, how were the people of the time planning to kill the demon lord?

... Maybe that didn’t have any means. That’s why the hero appeared.

“So I was surprised. Was the demon lord supposed to be this weak?”

Claudia spoke quietly.

“With only one stroke of my sword, the demon lord made an extremely surprised face. I remember it well. Seeing my face, he looked surprised, and angry, and...”

Claudia suddenly went silent. She covered her mouth with a hand in thought.

“What’s wrong?”

“Did I really managed to kill the demon lord?”

“... It’s a fact that you cut him, right?”

“Yes. But for that it was a little... the demon lord was so weak, it didn’t really feel real.”

... Then did you get the wrong person, I was about to say. But I swallowed down those words as they hit my throat.

“Do you still think the victim was the demon lord, or some reincarnation of him?”

“Not a reincarnation, the man himself.”

She sounded awfully convinced. “Any basis for that?”

“That’s... this sword is the evidence. You said it, didn’t you, Mr. Lawyer? Whether this sword can cut them or not decides whether they’re the demon lord.”

“But you’re suspicious of whether the demon lord is the only thing that sword can cut, right?”

“That’s, well... yes.”

She reluctantly nodded. Seeing her puff her cheeks as she looked down, perhaps she was displeased with something.

“As long as we don’t have a demon lord to test with, proving it is impossible. We can’t tell if it really is a sword that only murders the demon lord. But it’s certain it can only cut a special something.”

Investigation was necessary, I thought.

“On the 10th. When you attacked the victim, did you think he died?”

“... I don’t know. I’ve never killed anyone before, and I’ve never killed a monster either.”

“But wouldn’t that be dangerous? The holy sword can only cut the demon lord, right? When you’re attacked by monsters... well, this is purely hypothetical, but in the million-to-one chance you were attacked, how did you plan on dealing with it?”

“I just whack them away with the hilt.” She said it as if it were natural. “This thing’s quite sturdy, you know.”

“... Oh, is that so.”

“And there was a bow and arrow for hunting, and a hunting knife at the

house. I always carried the knife while in the forest.”

She closed her eyes. “But the monsters always ran away, so I could only ever eat fruits or vegetables,” she muttered softly.

And at the end, she made a downhearted face.

“I’m no good with a bow, I can never hit anything. I have no talent for anything but the sword.”

Even if you tell me that, what am I supposed to do about it?

An extremely, extremely dubious air filled the space.

The Events of the 10th (2)

“After you attacked the victim, it seems you headed for the forest behind the roof, but could you tell me what happened in detail?”

I posed her the question. Her clear blue eyes blinked a few times, looking at the ceiling as she answered. “I was in a trance at the time.”

“It was the most fulfilling feeling I’d ever experienced in all my life, and I felt as if I could do anything. After the demon lord fell to the other side of the parapet, my body suddenly felt tired, and I wanted to rest. So I headed for the forest.”

A normal person, I thought.

If there was a normal person here, perhaps they would take some actions out of shock.

Fleeing from the scene, or erasing the evidence.

But did Claudia really do absolutely nothing of the sort?

Why? Was the answer that she didn’t think killing the demon lord was a bad thing, more so she thought it was for the good of the world?

It was the first time she was in the outside world. The tension and stimulation caused an excess secretion of adrenaline.

No, was it the opposite? Do people become emotional because of the adrenaline?

... It doesn’t matter, really.

Having killed the demon lord, she had achieved her goal. With her sense of values as the base, she had done the right thing. If she had done something bad, she’d try to hide it, but since she did something good, there was no need to. That’s why without fleeing from the scene, she didn’t even hide any evidence.

And she took some rest.

“I’ve never been to the scene.” With that preface, I asked a question.

“Is there any sort of bridge between the hotel and the forest?”

“There wasn’t anything like that. That hotel’s back was fused right into the cliff face, and just by walking from the roof, I was able to reach the forest on top of the cliff.”

“I see. So you spent the night there, and went down the next morning?”

“... Yes. At the eighth hour of the 11th. Um, I took the hotel’s elevator.”

“Can you prove it?”

I ended up asking, but thinking closely, there was the surveillance camera in the elevator, so if I wanted to prove it, I just needed to check the footage.

But as I left some space for an answer, Claudia stared at the ceiling a while in thought, before answering.

“Um, perhaps the people who rode down with me could verify it.”

“Rode with you?”

.. She was with someone else in the elevator?

Seeing through my question, Claudia’s pale skin turned pink in embarrassment, her body fidgeting as she answered.

“Um, I... didn’t know how to operate an elevator to go downwards, so I rode down with someone else who was on the viewing platform.”

“... O-oh, I see.”

Come to think of it, that had become a point of discussion in the trial. When I was the one who raised the objection, I had completely forgotten.

“I followed behind a white-haired elder man, and a plump elder woman.”

She mumbled to herself with a slight downcast look, so I made sure of it. “Is there no doubt about it?”

“Yes, I can still remember their faces clearly. So if you call for them...”

Probably, with her memory prowess, she remembered them in considerable detail.

But I wasn't her. It would be next to impossible to find them.

... Though it was a good hint.

"In yesterday's trial, you saw the footage of the 12th, right?"

"... Yes."

"Did you see those people in that film?"

In no time at all, Claudia responded. "No.

"They weren't there," Claudia said clearly. "I didn't ride the elevator on the 12th. It was the 11th."

As she frantically let out her words, I spoke. "Understood... I'll believe you.

"Thank you for telling me everything."

I stood from my seat. Claudia raised her face to look at me. Her muddled blue eyes were begging that I stay here a while longer.

"I'll trust the testimony you just gave. But the others won't believe it. There isn't any evidence, so I need to go look for it. Will you wait for me?"

A strange silence continued a while. She didn't take her eyes off of me, and I also stared intently at her eyes.

"... Will... you come again?"

"Yes, I'll come. Until then, anything is fine. Please try to remember something."

I tried to leave the visiting room, when I suddenly noticed something.

"Come to think of it, about that journal. Why is it over?"

"Eh?"

When I turned, I found Claudia had stood, and her hand was on the doorknob. She turned back to me.

"Remember, at the start of the journal entry, you wrote that you would be ending it there, didn't you?"

"Oh, that. It's because I don't have any more pages to write on."

Claudia closed her eyes.

“The journal at my house... at first, there were lots of blank pages. But as I kept writing in it every day, the white space gradually went away, and that was the final page I had.”

“I’ll buy you a new one. Continue writing.”

... See you soon, I waved my hand to her, and left the room.